

PUGH'S POISONED RING.

A COMPLETE STORY.

BY RICHARD MARSH.

Illustrated by B. E. Minns.

I.

I REALLY don't know what induced me to do it; it was done on the impulse of the moment—one of those impulses to which collectors, real collectors, collectors in the higher sense, are peculiarly liable; I know I am.

Pugh had left the room for a moment. I just opened his cabinet of rings. I glanced within. One of the rings particularly caught my eye. I just picked it up as he came in. Unconsciously—or *almost* unconsciously—as Pugh entered, I dropped the ring into my waistcoat pocket. It was the merest coincidence. Five minutes afterwards I went away.

As I was walking homewards it occurred to me that the ring was—where it was. The fact is that I slipped my fingers into my waistcoat pocket, and—found it there. It struck me that, as it *was* where it was, I might as well examine the thing.

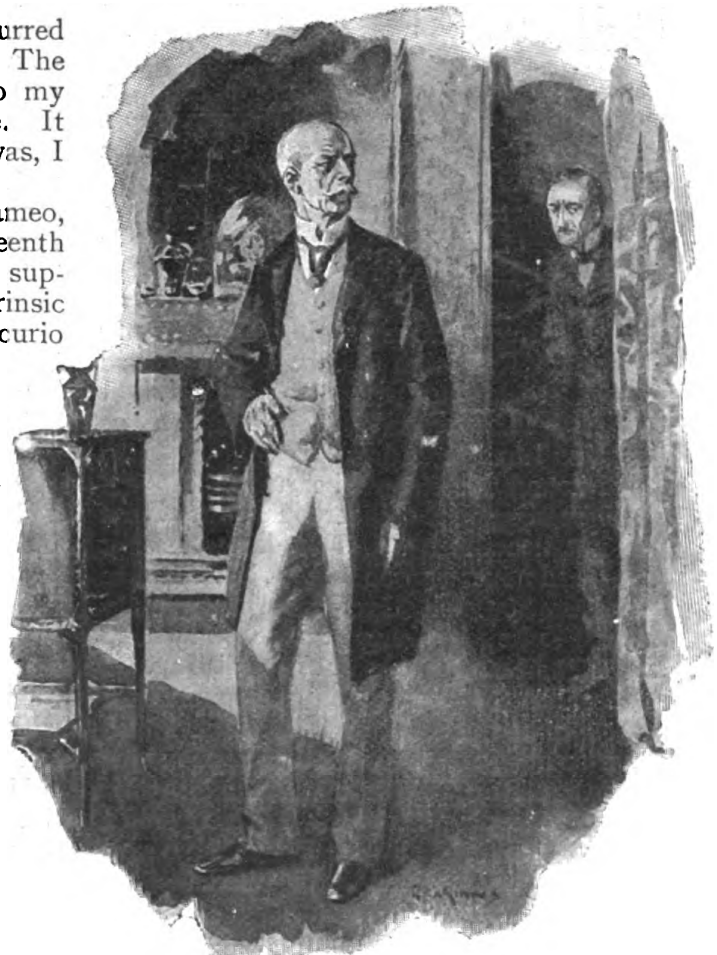
I took it out. It was an engraved cameo, Italian, of about the middle of the sixteenth century; it was set in gold. I don't suppose it was of any value, either intrinsic or fanciful. It was merely a little curio—quite a commonplace affair—the sort of thing one might almost pick up in the street. But the odd part of the affair was that it was just the ring I wanted; that struck me then, and it strikes me now, as being, in its way, peculiar.

I have a few rings of my own—Pugh fancies his collection is better than mine, but then it is notorious that Pugh is simply a conglomerate mass of vanity and ignorance—but, strangely enough, I am particularly weak, as a collector, in Italian work of the middle of the sixteenth century. The coincidence, under the circumstances, of finding that identical ring in my waistcoat pocket, was, of course, surprising.

I examined the thing more closely. It was a large cream-coloured ground, with the head of a woman cut in white

relief. It was not badly done—not at all. The more closely I looked into the thing, the more clearly I saw that the cameo, for a cameo, was quite a work of art. In *my* collection it would look uncommonly well. The woman's head was beautiful; the face was perfectly exquisite. I slipped the ring on to my little finger to study the effect.

As I did so I was just turning into the Edgware Road. As I reached the corner I was seized with a sudden spasm of pain; it was like a sudden constriction of the heart, or, better, an acute attack



TRESS TAKES A RING FROM THE CABINET AND SLIPS IT INTO HIS POCKET AS HIS FRIEND ENTERS.

of heartburn. At that moment who should come slouching along, with that habitual graceful slouch of his, but Martin Brasher. I attempted to wave my hand to him; but so severe was the spasm that I had to stagger against the railings to save myself from falling. He pulled up in front of me.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

"Do you think I'm drunk?"

It was such an absurd question to ask a man who he saw was almost fainting! Brasher's eyes began to wander all over me—he was quite capable of thinking, in spite of visual evidence to the contrary, that I was drunk! His gaze began at the soles of my boots, and I knew that, in the course of ages, it would ascend to the crown of my hat. I was aware that nothing would escape his glance; he would be sure to perceive the ring. As the coincidence by which it came into my possession was not one of those coincidences which one is necessarily desirous of publishing to the world, I began fumbling at my little finger to get it off. Brasher immediately fixed me with his eagle eye.

"What are you doing?" he inquired.

"Trying to stand," I said. "Brasher, would it be subjecting you to too great an inconvenience if I were to ask you to turn round and call me a cab?"

He hesitated; then, turning, he hailed a hansom. The instant his back was towards me I replaced the ring in my waistcoat pocket.

The cabman drove me home. Directly I reached Randolph Crescent I stumbled upstairs to my bedroom; I went straight to bed. That scoundrel Bob was out, as usual, so I had to undress myself. A pretty job I found it! That heartburn—I had never been subject to heartburn, but if that was not heartburn I did not know what it was—had never for one instant ceased since it had first begun. Every vein in my body seemed to be throbbing at once. My head seemed to be on the point of splitting. I supposed that I was suffering from an acute attack of indigestion, though what I had eaten or drunk to give me indigestion was more than I could think. I mixed myself a strong sleeping-draught—I felt that if I did not go to sleep at once I should go mad—and, somehow, tumbled into bed.

II.

"TRESS!" Someone seemed to be shaking me. "Tress!" Someone was

shaking me. "Tress!" There could be no doubt about it, someone was shaking me to pieces. "Tress!"

I roused myself. I looked up. I found that I was lying in bed. Pugh was standing by my bedside, shaking me as though he were resolved to shake my body into its constituent parts.

"Pugh, is that you?"

"It is. You are a late sleeper, Joseph Tress. Do you know what time it is?"

"No."

"It is nearly noon."

Nearly noon! And I was in bed before nine o'clock the day before. I had been asleep for nearly fifteen hours, and still I felt unrested. It was that sleeping draught had done it. It must have been too strong.

"I thought that you were never going to wake, upon this side, again—that you were in your long, last sleep. I shouldn't have been surprised."

I sat up in bed with some difficulty. I looked at Pugh. I noticed, for the first time, that his acidulated countenance was irradiated by what he, doubtless, meant to be a smile. It made him look as though he were suffering from an attack of jaundice.

"I had an attack of indigestion yesterday after I left you, and I took a sleeping draught. I fancy the draught must have been too strong."

"After you left me? An attack of indigestion? I see. Is that all?"

"What else would you have had me have?"

"Ah!"

Pugh's "Ah!" was intended to convey a whole encyclopedia of meaning. What an idiot that man is! He drew a chair to the bedside. He sat down on it. He crossed his hands upon the handle of his stick, and leaned his chin upon his hands. He stared at me, like an owl.

"Tress, do you remember, yesterday, when I was showing you my cabinet of rings, noticing a cameo ring, cream ground, with a woman's head in white relief, of sixteenth century Italian workmanship?"

Now I knew why he had come. Up to that moment I had forgotten all about the ring, and the odd coincidence that I had found it in my waistcoat pocket. For the second I was taken aback. I did not know what to say to him. My head felt fuddled.

"A cameo ring, cream ground, with a

woman's head in white relief, of sixteenth century Italian workmanship?"

"That's it, exactly. I see you noticed it."

I shook my head. I did not like to say, in so many words, I hadn't, being as fond of truth as most men.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, when you went, the ring went too."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Only, when you had gone, I found that the ring had gone. You are sure you didn't notice it?"

"Quite sure."

I was driven to a lie.

"That's odd, because I thought that I saw you pay particular attention to that particular ring—a cameo ring, cream ground, with a woman's head in white relief, of sixteenth century Italian workmanship. You are quite sure you didn't notice it—just think."

"I don't want to think; don't I tell you I am sure?"

What did the imbecile mean by making me pile lie upon lie? Pugh rose.

"That's odd, very odd. Well, it's gone. I thought I'd call and tell you, because"—what he meant for a smile grew more pronounced—"that ring is possessed of peculiar properties."

"Peculiar properties?"

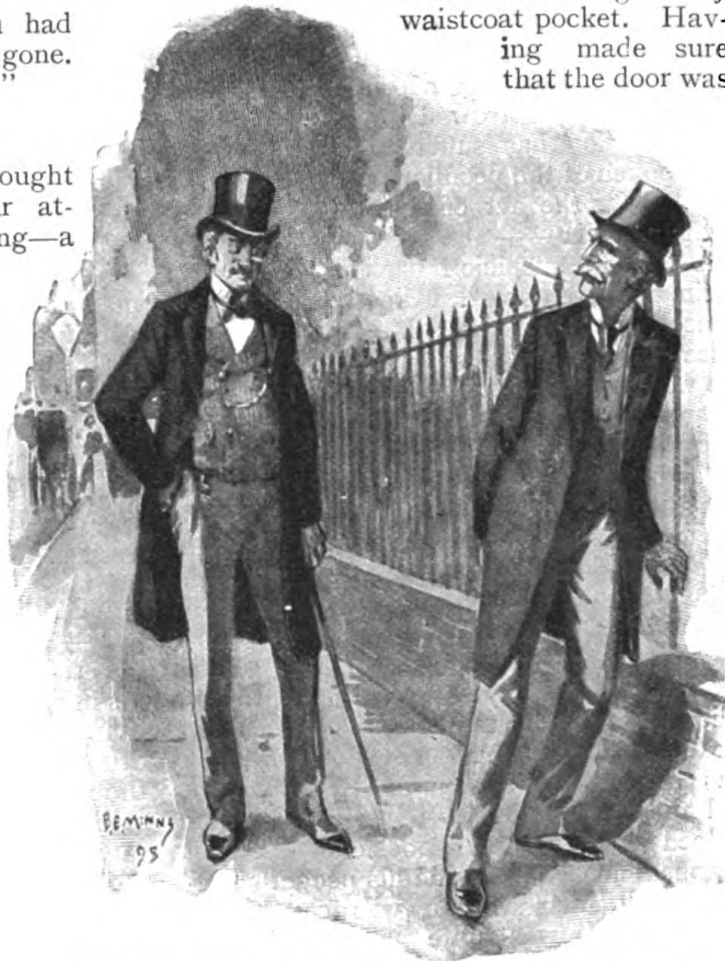
"Some very peculiar properties indeed. A collector, ignorant of those properties, might not find it such an acquisition as he supposed. However, it is of no consequence, since you didn't notice it. Good day, Tress. I hope your indigestion will be better."

He went. Directly he was gone I scrambled out of bed and locked the door. What an escape I had had! In the confused state of my mind, had he persisted in his questioning, I might have been worried into some fatal admission. I was in a fit state neither of mind nor of body to adequately cope with his impertinent prying.

And what did he mean by his mysterious allusions to the peculiar properties of his wretched ring? All bunkum, probably. Still, he had emphasised his words in a

manner which seemed to suggest that he had intended them to mean something. An Italian ring, of the sixteenth century? I remembered, unless chroniclers lied, that certain rings of that period had been credited, in Italy, as being possessed of peculiar properties—as Pugh said, of very peculiar properties indeed.

When Brasher's back had been turned, at the corner of the Edgware Road, I had returned the ring to my waistcoat pocket. Having made sure that the door was



AS HE GOES HOME HE IS SEIZED WITH SPASMS AND MEETS AN UNWELCOME FRIEND.

locked, I took up my waistcoat and looked for the ring. It was strange. It wasn't there. I remembered, distinctly, putting the ring into the right-hand pocket. But as, then, there was no ring in that pocket I presumed that my memory betrayed me, and I had put it in the pocket on the other side. No, there was no ring in that one either. I couldn't have been such an ass as to have put it into my watch-pocket, and in fact I hadn't.

Then where was it? In the midst of my suffering I had torn my clothes off anyhow. It was possible that, unnoticed

by me, it had found its way out of my pocket, and a refuge on the floor. I went down on my hands and knees. I peered under the bed, under the furniture; I minutely examined every square inch of the carpet. There was no ring there. It was possible that I might have lost the ring on my homeward way. I say it was possible, but it did not seem to me that it was probable. I began to be conscious of a feeling of irritation. When a collector so far yields to the enthusiasm of the moment as to borrow a specimen, he does not like to lose that specimen within half an hour of his having borrowed it. He feels that his collection has suffered a loss. Pugh had spoken of the peculiar properties of the ring. Was the act of self-abstraction one of them? Or——

A terrible suspicion flashed across my brain. Pugh, for all I knew, had shown himself into my room. He had found me asleep in bed—helpless! I knew the man. He was a man who, under certain circumstances, would stick at nothing. A man who would shrink from no trick because it chanced to be a dirty one. A man who was absolutely devoid of a sense of honesty. To add to that lot of trumpery which he calls his collection he would rob his friend. I had not the slightest doubt of it. I knew it as a positive fact.

On one occasion he had actually stolen my Sir Walter Raleigh pipe, a priceless relic, being the identical pipe which that great man himself had smoked. When he was taken, red-handed, in his crime, he had the audacity to pretend that he had slipped the pipe into his pocket by mistake, wrapped, as it was, inside his pocket-handkerchief. Such a man was capable of anything. It was quite within the range of possibility that he had come into my bedroom, found me wrapped in the slumber of unconscious innocence, and overhauled my clothing.

And then he had had the consummate hypocrisy to wake me, and to ask me, smiling all the time—I had observed his smile!—if I had noticed, in his cabinet, his wretched ring. And he had spoken of its peculiar properties! If, the next time I called at his house, he were to show me his cabinet of rings—which he would be sure to do!—and I were to see in it that ring, staring me in the face, I should feel demoralised.

The thing was to find out if he had shown himself into my room.

I rang for Bob. I rang once, I rang twice, I rang thrice; the third time I nearly broke the bell. Still no Bob. I went outside the bedroom door and bawled for him. By the time I had bawled myself hoarse, and was meditating descending to the kitchen in my nightshirt, and kicking him out of the house up the area steps, I heard, below, the sound of somebody stumbling up the stairs. Was it possible that, at that hour of the day, before I was dressed, the man was drunk? It sounded as though he was. Bump, bump, up he came; every moment I expected to hear him go bump, bump down again. At last he came blundering through the bedroom door.

"What on earth, you scoundrel, do you mean by getting drunk before I'm dressed? Do you know what time it is? It isn't noon!"

"I'm not drunk—I wish I were. I'm a dead 'un."

"You are drunk, sir! I tell you what it is, Bob Haines, I've had enough of your villainy, and I'll send you packing. Who showed Mr. Pugh up into my room?"

"Don't know."

"Of course you don't, you tipping fool!"

"I tell you I'm not drunk, I'm dying. Oh!—Oh!"

Leaning against the wall, he clapped his hand to his side, and groaned. I eyed him. He did not look as though he were drunk, and to do Bob Haines justice, although he has the most capacious and constant thirst of any man I ever knew, I never saw him exhibit any signs of having drunk too much. His is a thirst which nothing shall quench.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I've got a pain—here! It's heart-burn! All my veins is bursting! So's my head."

Curious. From his words, and his looks, he appeared to be suffering from an attack exactly similar to that by which I had been overtaken the evening before. I turned away.

"Bob, have you been in my room this morning?"

"Once. You was asleep."

Oh, I was, was I? Had *he* overhauled my clothes? What *were* the peculiar properties attached to that ring of Pugh's? I did not, in spite of the new and lurid suspicions which were darkening my mind, like to charge Bob Haines then

and there with stealing from me the ring which I had borrowed from Pugh in the enthusiasm of the moment. Bob was an old and, comparatively, a faithful servant, as servants go—they are all thieves. I did not like to blast his career, to charge him with an act of perfidy—that is, unless the evidence against him was undeniable, and—and until my mind was settled. I myself still was feeling queer. So I sent him out of the room.

"Go away; and, if you must die, die decently, without making all that noise!"

In spite of my command I heard him groan-groaning, as he went bump-bumping down the stairs.

Hardly had he gone than someone made a thundering assault on the hall-door knocker. The door was opened. Someone entered—two persons, apparently. I heard them coming up the stairs. Not only did they come upstairs, but, without a with your leave or by your leave, or rapping at my door, or any sort of form or ceremony, they came into my room, just as I was putting on my trousers. It was that idiot Pugh, accompanied by that, if possible, still greater idiot, Martin Brasher.

"Hollo, Pugh, what have you come back for?"

"I have come back in consequence of a communication made to me by my friend Brasher, whom I chanced to encounter within a dozen yards of your doorstep. I should like to have, with your permission, five minutes' conversation with you, in the presence of Brasher. Take a chair, Brasher; sit down." Brasher sat down, on Pugh's invitation. Pugh sat down on his own.

"Mr. Tress, I should like once more to ask you—and before you answer I beg that you will bring your mind to bear upon the question—if, when yesterday I was showing you my cabinet of rings, you did not notice a cameo ring, cream ground, with a woman's head in white relief, of sixteenth century Italian workmanship."

What did the fellow mean by pestering me with his ridiculous questions?

"I don't know, Pugh, what you're driving at. I can assure you that I haven't time, or inclination, to notice all your rubbish. I have told you, frankly, more than once, what is my opinion of that cabinet of yours."

Pugh waved his hands in the air.

"Quite so! Just so! We are quite aware that, as you say, you have more than once shown the extent of your connoisseurship. But that is not the point. The point is, that that particular ring is missing—missing, Tress. And a

further point is, that that particular ring is possessed of—peculiar properties."



HIS FRIENDS COME INTO HIS ROOM WITHOUT RAPPING, AND INSINUATE THAT HE HAS GOT THE MISSING RING.

"My dear Pugh, I don't care about its peculiar properties."

"But I think it just as well that you should care, under the *special* circumstances. To begin with, that ring belonged to no less a person than Lucrezia Borgia."

"Lucrezia Jones!"

"Not Jones, but Borgia. Have you never heard of Lucrezia Borgia, Tress? She was a person of some notoriety, though possibly, and even probably, her name may not have come your way."

Confound his impudence; ignorant ass!

"Lucrezia Borgia, Tress, was a lady who had a partiality for getting rid of her friends, before she robbed them."

Pausing, Pugh looked steadily at me.

"That was an age of poisoners. In southern Europe they simply swarmed. Poison was Lucrezia's favourite method of disposing of her friends. Chroniclers tell us that, of all poisoners, she was the queen. She had as many ways of poisoning a friend as a modern *chef* has of cooking an egg. And one of her ways—Lucrezia's pretty ways—was by means of poisoned rings."

I could not help it, but I started. I know that Pugh observed the start, because he immediately indulged in his jaundiced libel on a smile.

"That ring, Tress, which was in my cabinet, and which now is missing, was one of Lucrezia's poisoned rings."

I turned away—I was compelled to.

"I don't know, Pugh, what all this has to do with me, though I, no doubt, ought to thank you for imparting such valuable information."

"Not at all, Tress, not at all. Permit me to continue. The way in which that ring works—in a poisonous sense—is by wearing it. Put it on your finger, you are poisoned."

I busied myself with the things upon the mantelshelf, being conscious of a sense of distinct discomfort. I was aware that Pugh was regarding me intently—with unqualified enjoyment—from behind, as, I make no doubt, was that addle-headed Brasher. The plague take Pugh's two-penny-halfpenny ring! I wished I had never seen it.

"The way in which the fair Lucrezia used to work the oracle was doubtless this: She used herself to put the ring upon the victim's finger, in that graceful way she had—the woman's head in white relief is Lucrezia's own likeness—and that same instant the recipient of the lady's generosity fell dead. The gift was probably presented in private. There was no eye there to see it given. It was slipped off the finger almost at the same instant in which the lady had slipped it on. It left no trace of its presence behind. The medical verdict was, no doubt, the contemporary equivalent for valvular disease of the heart. The victim had been slain as by a bolt from on high. That peculiarly active virtue which, if the chronicles are true, the ring once possessed, has been modified by time. Now, it does not kill—at once."

I should like to have thrown Pugh out of the bedroom window; he was simply playing on my nerves.

"Quite recently I have had that ring examined by an eminent toxicologist. The way in which it does its work, in this present year of grace, is this: You place it on your finger—as you, for instance, Tress, might do. That same instant you feel a pain in your side."

Almost without knowing it, I clapped my hand to my side.

"That pain is accompanied by a throbbing of all the veins in your body, and a feeling as though your head was about to split into pieces."

The man was simply brutal. I protest that, as he spoke, the symptoms he described returned to me with all their original force.

"You must own, Tress, that it was a little odd that I should have missed the ring directly I missed you. It appears that, as you were leaving my house, Brasher chanced to meet you. It is in consequence of a communication Brasher has made to me, referring to that chance encounter, that I have ventured upon this further interview. Brasher says—I believe, Brasher, that I am right in saying that when you encountered Mr. Tress he appeared to be suffering from indisposition?"

"He did."

"What appeared to you to be the nature of his indisposition?"

"He appeared to be suffering from a pain in his side. He was almost doubled up in two, and he had his hands pressed convulsively against the region of his heart."

"Did you notice anything else?"

"I did. I noticed upon the little finger of his left hand a ring."

"A ring? Can you tell us, Brasher, what kind of a ring it was which you noticed upon the little finger of his left hand?"

"I can. My eye was struck by it at once. First, because, although I have known Tress for many years, I never before saw him wear a ring. And, second, because the ring itself was a remarkable ring."

"Not the sort of ring which an ordinary English gentleman would be likely to wear during his walks abroad?"

"Certainly not."

"Describe it, Brasher."

"It was a large oval-shaped cameo. It had a cream ground, with a woman's head in white relief. It was set in gold, curiously

chased. It struck me as being an antique, probably Italian, of the sixteenth century."

What eyes that Brasher has!

"You are quite sure, Tress, that when, yesterday, I was showing you my cabinet of rings you did not notice a cameo ring, cream ground, woman's head in white relief, of sixteenth century Italian workmanship?"

I sank down upon the bed. I was doubled up with pain—it had all come back again.

"Pugh, what's the antidote?"

"The antidote, Tress? To what?"

"To that confounded ring of yours!"

"Tress!" He pretended to be shocked. Rising from his chair, he let his stick fall to the floor with a clatter. "Is it possible that you—you! can have robbed your friend, the oldest friend you have in the world! I thought you capable of most things—of palming off the most trumpery rubbish as a priceless relic—but I never thought you capable of theft, from a friend! Oh, Tress! Tress! that it should have come to this!"

He groaned—the hypocrite!

"What's the antidote?"

"The best antidote I can recommend is, primarily, the return of the stolen property."

"I haven't got it!"

"Tress! Don't add another perjury—you, who are perhaps a dying man."

"I haven't! I slipped it into my waistcoat pocket by mistake."

"You slipped it into your pocket by mistake? I see. That explains how it was you didn't notice it. That also explains how it was you happened to be wearing it when Brasher met you in the street."

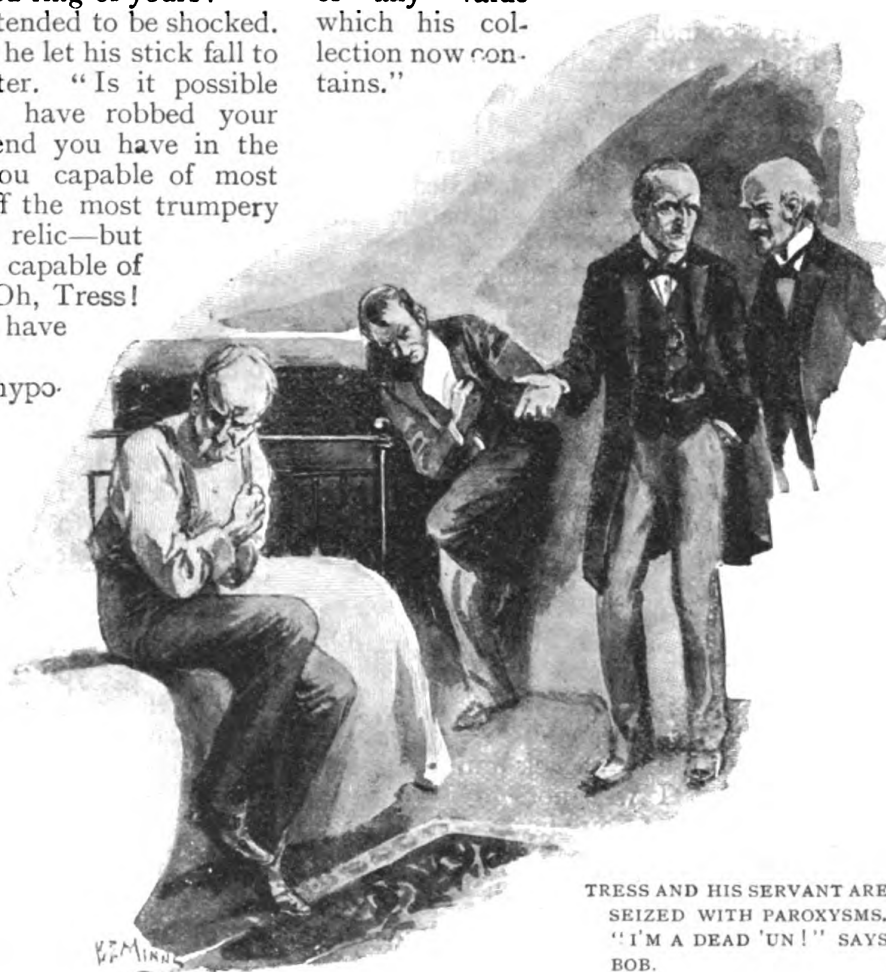
"It struck me senseless! I believe I'm dying now! I put it into my waistcoat pocket. When I looked for it this morning, it was gone. I thought—you had come in—when I was sleeping—found it—and taken it again."

"You thought! Tress, consider! Even now your moments may be numbered!"

"Oh-h! Ring the bell, and tell them to send me up some brandy!"

Instead of doing as I requested, and as common humanity directed, he began to preach at me to Brasher.

"Brasher, this man has been my friend for over thirty years. Look at him now, and ponder! I have helped him in his collection. You know my taste, what I may call my genius for the discovery of real antiques. If it had not been for me he would not have possessed the few articles of any value which his collection now contains."



TRESS AND HIS SERVANT ARE SEIZED WITH PAROXYSMS. "I'M A DEAD 'UN!" SAYS BOB.

Oh, if I had been sufficiently master of myself to kick him!

"And how does he show his gratitude? I will tell you. He breaks into my house like a highwayman, and ransacks all my most precious stores. He knows that I possess, for an amateur—a mere amateur, Brasher—one of the finest collections in Europe. He is green with envy, racked by covetous desires. He fixes his mind upon one of the finest gems in my

collection, a relic for which crowned heads—crowned heads, Brasher!—might sigh in vain, and which none the less, so marvellously strong is my natural born instinct as a connoisseur, I picked up at a little town in Italy for less than fifteen shillings."

"More than it was worth."

"You hear him, Brasher, you hear him say that that was more than it was worth? But though he says it, he has sufficient knowledge, even in the midst of his wallowing ignorance, to be aware that it is of priceless value. But his knowledge goes no further. He does not know, what I, the true connoisseur, perceived at once, that in the hands of an ignorant man the ring would deal death and danger. So he steals it—from me, his friend! Within a very few minutes his misdeed finds him out. You saw him struggling with death—we see him struggling now! Brasher, look on him now, and ponder!"

"When you have quite finished, perhaps you'll ring the bell."

"I have not finished, but I will ring the bell. And when I have rung it, I will begin again."

"Oh!"

Brasher rang.

"Ring again."

He did.

"Smash the bell!"

He almost did.

"Bob's drunk."

Pugh turned to Brasher. He put his hands behind his back. He wagged his head.

"Like master, like man!"

"Go downstairs and kick him."

"No, Tress, I will not go downstairs and kick him. You hear Mr. Tress, Brasher, asking me to go downstairs to kick his servant? Unfortunately, that's the kind of man he is."

We waited; I expected I should have to go downstairs myself. Then there was a sound of somebody coming lumbering up the stairs; I knew it was Bob. At last he blundered into the room.

"Oh!" he gasped, and collapsed against the wall.

At that same moment a paroxysm overtook me too. Pugh addressed himself to Bob.

"Well, my man, I'm sorry to see you in this condition."

"Not so sorry as I am—I'm a dead 'un."

Brasher took Pugh by the arm.

"It's a curious coincidence, Mr. Pugh, but this person appears to be suffering in precisely the same manner as Mr. Tress; was suffering when I encountered him yesterday evening at the corner of the Edgware Road."

Pugh turned to me; I was literally doubled up with pain.

"And as Mr. Tress is suffering now. I have it!" Pugh snapped his fingers in the air. "Tress, do you really mean that that ring is missing—that you don't know where it is?"

"I do."

"Then you have taken it!" Pugh turned to Bob. "So true it is that as the master so the man. You have stolen from your master the ring which your master stole from me!"

Pugh pointed his finger at Bob as if he—Pugh—were an accusing spirit. In the midst of his agony, Bob seemed to be taken aback.

"What d'ye say?"

"I say, and I say it again, that you—you too, have dipped your hands in crime. Fit associate of such a man!"

"Look here, Pugh, I wish you wouldn't speak of me like that to my own servant."

"But I will, Tress, I will. I will probe, at all hazards, to the bottom of this long-drawn-out crime." He returned to Bob. "Villain, confess your guilt. You have stolen from your master the ring of which he previously had plundered me."

"What are you talking about? I don't know nothing about no ring."

"Brasher, come here; look at this man. You know something of the working of—poisons."

"Poisons!"

Bob staggered back against the friendly wall.

"Look at this man's face—look at it closely. Do you not perceive, in the working of the muscles of his countenance, something strange and ghastly?"

"I do," said Brasher; "I see it most distinctly."

He would have been a fool if he didn't, considering the spectacle which Bob just then presented.

"Do you see a convulsive twitching?"

"I do."

"Do you see an ashen pallor?"

"Most undoubtedly."

"A startled look about the eyes?"

"I see all that."

"Man, the ring which you stole from your master's waistcoat pocket was——"

Bob gave himself away.

"What?"

"A poisoned ring."

Bob sprang at least six inches from the ground.

"If you put that ring on your finger, though only for an instant, you are doomed."

"Oh!" groaned Bob.

"Do you feel a pain in your side?"

Bob groaned again.

"Do you feel as if all your veins were filled with fire?"

Another groan.

"Do you feel as if your head were about to burst into a thousand atoms?"

Another groan, still louder than before.

"Wretched man, time is short. Tell us how long you wore this ill-fated gem, in order that we may, if possible, take measures to save you from the doom you have so justly merited. But first, before anything can be done, you must give me back the ring."

"I haven't got it."

"Where is it then?"

Bob drew himself upright, to the best of his ability, with his back against the wall. He looked round the room with ghastly eyes.

"I never seed such a house as this in all my days."

"That I can easily believe, my man. And I trust that it may never be your ill fortune to look on such another."

As he gave vent to this fervent desire of his heart, Pugh's eyes were fixed on me.

"I come up into this room this morning to see if master was awake. Cook had told me that he came in drunk last night."

"She lied!" I roared.

"It was a natural error," commented Brasher. "My own first impression, when I saw you yesterday evening at the corner of the Edgware Road, was that you were suffering from over-indulgence in strong drink."

Thus is a man robbed of his good name! Bob went on—

"He wasn't. He was sound asleep. I never see a man so sound asleep. I says to myself, 'He *must* have raised his elbow. I know what he can swallow.'"

"You hear, Brasher, what is the servant's opinion of the master?"

Only wait! I would have a settlement with Bob!

"There was his clothes littered all over the place. I sets to to put 'em straight. As I picks up the waistcoat, something falls out of one of the pockets. It was a ring."

"A ring," said Pugh. "Just so—a ring!"

"It was a trumpery thing——"

"My man!" said Pugh.

"I picks it up and looks at it; it was a trumpery thing, not worth tuppence-hapenny!"

"Brasher, you hear this man—you hear him? My good fellow, that ring is a relic of the Borgias!"

"I don't know nothing about no boarders. I says to myself, when I sees it, and I says to you, that I never see a commoner-looking article."

It sounds incredible, but I chuckled. I resolved to forgive him everything.

"The man's ignorance," cried Pugh, "is as colossal as the master's!"

"It was just a dirty white stone with another stone stuck on top of it, like a woman's head."



"'COOK,' I SAYS, 'HAVE YOU GOT HALF A CROWN?'"

"So he describes one of the finest cameos that was ever touched by an Italian graver!"

"The ring itself was brass."

"Brass! It's the finest gold."

"Don't tell me! I know gold when I see it, and I know brass. I've seen heaps and heaps of rings like that, and better, at fairs; pay your penny and you takes your choice."

"Brasher, this man is like the ring—unique!"

"I takes a squint at it, and I sees it was a common-looking article, and I says to myself, 'This ain't worth nothing to nobody.' I was just going to put it back in the pocket when it comes across me, sudden, 'This is the very ring for cook!'"

Pugh gasped.

"For cook?"

"For cook."

"And why—why for cook?"

"Well, I don't mind saying it, if I've got to say it." Bob looked determined. "I've been engaged to cook—nine years *she* says it is, and I've never given her an engagement ring yet. She's always bothering me for one, so when I sees this ring wasn't worth nothing to nobody, I says to myself, 'This is the very thing for an engagement ring for cook.'"

Pugh took out his handkerchief. He wiped his brow.

"The very thing for an engagement ring for cook—that relic of the Borgias—the ring which was once the property of the fair Lucrezia herself! Brasher, don't—don't give way. Go on, my man, go on."

"I puts it into my pocket, and as I was going upstairs to my room, who should I see but cook. 'Cook,' I says, 'have you got half a crown?' 'What for?' she says. 'For me,' I says. 'No,' she says, 'I haven't.' 'Well,' I says, 'I don't quite like telling you, but the fact is, I've been spending a good bit of money on you lately, and it's left me rather short.'" Bob drew the back of his hand across his lips. "I never did like giving something for nothing, no matter to who it is. 'On me!' she says. 'I'll believe in your spending a brass farthing on anybody but yourself when I sees it.' 'Well,' I says, 'I've been buying you a ring.' 'A ring!' she says. She turned quite yellor."

Bob grinned. Pugh and Brasher didn't know what to make of it at all. I knew the blackguard.

"'Yes,' I says, 'I've been buying you

one of the finest rings that ever yet you saw. Look at that now!' I takes it out of my pocket, and I holds it out in front of her. She didn't think nothing of it; I knew she wouldn't. She ain't such a fool as she looks. 'What, that dirty, tawdry, second-hand looking thing,' she says. 'Why, it ain't worth tuppence.' 'Ah, that's where you're wrong,' I says. 'That ring's worth a whole heap of money. If I was to tell you what I gave for that ring you wouldn't believe me. I only come on it accidental like. I calls it a handsome ring.' 'Well, I don't,' she says, 'I calls it hideous—I wouldn't be seen with such a thing on a finger of mine, not me!' 'Ah,' I says, 'wait till you sees it on the human hand.' And I slips it on the little finger of my right hand—just to show it off like. Oh, my crikey!" Bob doubled himself up in the middle. "I was took with such a pain in the side I was obliged to holler. 'What's wrong now?' she says. 'Take the ring,' I says. And I takes it off my finger, I don't know how, and gives it her, and I makes straight for my bedroom, and I chucks myself upon the bed—I was that bad!"

Pugh looked at Bob. Then he looked at Brasher.

"Brasher, is it not strange, is it not more than strange, that in this age of so-called enlightenment there should exist in a civilised country such a master and such a man? Whether to blame more the master or the man it passes my wisdom to pronounce. It is true that the man is an ignorant creature, but then so also is the master. But it certainly, to me, does seem incredible that any creature having any pretensions, even the most shadowy pretensions, to even *legal* intellect, should present that priceless relic of the Borgias—Lucrezia's own ring—to a cook!"

"But how about the cook?" inquired Brasher. "If she puts——"

The room door was thrown wide open. Mary, the housemaid, came rushing in.

"If you please, sir, I believe that cook's a-dying!"

"A-dying, Mary?"

"She's been up in her bedroom ever so long, and I went up to see what she was doing, because there's nothing done for our dinner—no potatoes, nor nothing; and there she was lying on the bed, groaning awful. If you please, sir, I believe that cook's a-dying."

And Mary, who is a sensitive creature, at least so I should imagine, wept—I don't know why.

"It's the ring!" said Brasher.

We went up to cook in a body. First Mary, then Brasher, then Pugh, then me, then Bob—who apparently did not care to be left behind, though it was all that he could do to stagger. It was the ring, there was no doubt about it. That love offering of the faithful Bob had all but done for her, if one might judge from the way in which she was behaving. I have seldom heard a woman make more noise; it had not deprived her of the use of her lungs. We heard her squealing as we came along the passage. When we entered the room her squeals redoubled.

"There is the ring!" said Pugh, pointing at her with his outstretched hand.

There was the ring, on cook's engagement finger, the third finger of her left hand—the love token of a faithful heart, of a nine years' old engagement, the cameo ring, cream ground, with a woman's head in white relief, sixteenth century Italian workmanship, that relic of the Borgias, Lucrezia's pretty plaything. Finding herself in possession of that speaking symbol of Bob's fond love, she had been unable to resist the temptation of seeing how it really did look upon the human hand. She had put it on to see. The immediate result was that she was lying there upon the bed.

"Brasher," said Pugh, "if it is true that the dead are conscious of the acts of the living, how, at this moment, the great Lucrezia must be writhing in her grave!"

III.

WELL, I survived, or I should not be telling this tale; and Bob survived, and cook. And I do not know that either of us is the worse for our experience of the peculiar characteristics of the fair Lucrezia's pretty plaything. Last week cook was married to Bob. A nicely assorted couple they bid fair to make.

Yet we might have been worse—much worse, easily. Pugh allowed me, in one of his rare moments of affability, to submit the ring to a minute examination, and I herewith acquit him of exaggerating its natural wickedness. He has his gifts in that direction; but no man could paint that diabolical illustration of mediæval fiendishness worse than it deserved, not even Pugh.

The ring itself was hollow. When you put it on your finger, directly it came

into contact with the flesh, two minute needles were released, one on either side, which

had sufficient penetrating force to introduce the poison, which was contained in the reservoir-like circlet, beneath the cuticle

This poison must, originally, have been of an extraordinarily active character, for, after the passage of probably more than three hun-

dred years, it still retained sufficient of its force, so soon as the tiniest drop found its way beneath the scarf-skin, to impregnate the entire system, rushing through the veins with inconceivable rapidity, and instantly affecting the action of the heart.

In its youth it must have slain with lightning-like rapidity, since in its belated old age it could use folks as it had done Bob, and cook, and me.

The ring is still in Pugh's collection, what is left of it. By the exercise of great skill and care I succeeded in taking it to pieces—wonderfully ingenious mechanism had been contrived by its criminal constructor—but I was not so successful in putting the pieces together again. Pugh says that is my stupidity, which shows his ignorance.

However, there are the fragments. Should any person desire to learn what could be planned in the way of wickedness three hundred and fifty years ago, he had better give Pugh a call.

P.S.—I presented cook with her engagement ring. Bob and she seemed to have a vague impression that I ought to—so I did.



"IF YOU PLEASE, SIR, I BELIEVE THAT COOK'S A-DYING."